

Nina Rubinstein Alonso
Painted Faces: Wabi Sabi

Martine's in the market considering which strawberries to buy when a petite woman approaches wearing tangerine lipstick outlined in purple, her brown eyes ringed in charcoal, eyelids silver, eyelashes blackened. Martine walks away from that painted face and the strawberries.

During high school she sometimes wore lipstick but stopped after George, her senior prom date, bumped her nose while trying to kiss her and squeeze her breasts. She shoved him away, said she'd get out of the car and walk if he tried to touch her again. He drove her home in his rattling Buick mumbling clumsy apologies.

In her bathroom mirror she sees smeared lipstick, messy hair, feels filthy, scrubs in the shower then puts her puffy blue prom gown in the deepest part of her closet and never wears it again. George calls saying 'sorry,' but she refuses to see him. Her mom, who sometimes wears lipstick when going out with dad, notices her daughter looks pale but decides it's best not to comment.

Martine tells her friend Renee about the painted woman in the market then says "I'm done with makeup, just moisturizer and sunscreen." Renee, an artist who's also anti-facepaint, agrees. "It's senseless, distorted, artificial and awkward," emphasizing her dislike of "phony faces." Makeup is minimal at their college whether the girl's pretty or plain, though some dye their hair various colors. "No need for paint," Renee says, then adds "My approach is 'Wabi sabi,' be natural, accept yourself, whatever asymmetry and imperfection."

Martine has to look up wabi sabi, a Japanese concept, but appreciates its subtlety, the clay pot with a gold-mended crack, the scatter of freckles, the scar from a childhood injury, the wildly curly hair, whatever imperfection is part of someone's physical reality. The person may not be beautiful, but it's better to accept what's natural rather than attempt to mask it.

"The heart needs to be be our guide," Renee says, "not whatever external image is generated by fashion magazines selling paint."